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The Christian - Muslim Relations in the Philippines and the Daughters' of Charity Apostolate with Muslims

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1. The Christian - Muslim Relations

I begin my sharing with a quote from the late Bishop Tutud who is considered the Father of the Dialogue Movements in the Philippines:

"In situations of prejudice, dialogue means an abiding and genuine search for goodness, beauty, and truth... each person must be open to the fact that one can be enriched by the goodness, beauty and truth found in the other. Each must be ready to discover the face of God in the other's faith...."

Bishop Tutud gave this message to the Christians in the Philippines particularly those in Mindanao because it could not be denied that one of the major reasons for the frequent conflicts between Muslims and Christians is the prejudice that Christians have against Muslims or vice-versa. Muslims presented Christians as land grabbers and oppressors who took away their lands from them. In the late 1940's, Christians from the other parts of the Philippines settled in Mindanao in response to the President's decree about Mindanao as the "land of promise". On the other hand, Christians considered the Muslims as murderers, thieves and dirty. That is why the primary problem of the young church in Mindanao in relations with our Muslim brothers is the problem of peace.

What is the Church doing to resolve this conflict which is now a national issue because of the Muslim's demand for an independent Islamic State in Mindanao? In Mindanao, the people are caught in the culture of violence, confronted with threats that are greater now than ever. Problems like starvation and poverty, environmental decay, militarism, inequality, underdevelopment, sexism, ethnic and religious discrimination all provide indications of the dangers the Church faces.

The Church believes in the urgent need to address this situation. This culture of violence must be supplanted by a culture of peace, a culture that must be defined by paradigms of justice, unity, respect for all cultures and religions, a sensitiveness to our ecology and spirituality.

It is in the light of this pressing concern that the Church in the Philippines especially in Mindanao took the following initiatives:

- a) Bishops-Wama Forum to dialogue among the Catholic Bishops of

Mindanao, Muslim Religious leaders and the NCCP Bishops who, in the spirit of inter-religious dialogue, affirm their common commitment to the peace process.

b) Silsilah Dialogue Movement to promote deeper understanding and better relations between Muslims and Christians together people of other faiths.

c) SALAM Foundation: Social and Literary Agenda for Muslims.

d) PAZ (Peace Advocates Zamboanga) is a Catholic organization with the purpose of working for peace, consolidating and strengthening good relations between Muslims and Christians and among all peoples.

e) Interfaith Dialogue Centers which are found in many dioceses and parishes in Mindanao.

f) Education for Peace Centers which are found in practically all Catholic schools in Mindanao with the primary objective of having peace education in the curriculum or integrating it in all subject disciplines.

2. The Daughter of Charity and their Apostolate with the Muslims.

The Daughters of Charity are present in two dioceses/prelatures which are predominantly Muslim: 85-90% in these two provinces.

Many of our works or apostolates are prelature- or parish-based; we are integrated in the pastoral work of the parish as Basic Ecclesial Community coordinators, Family Life Apostolate coordinators, working in catechetical programs, social and health services and above all in the education apostolate.

I am at present the administrator of a secondary school run by the Prelature. The school has a vital role in the mission of the Church in Mindanao for it serves as a point of entry to the Muslim communities.

We have 353 high school students. Sixty percent of them are Muslims. The number of Muslim students in the school has increased significantly in the past three years. Now they are conscious of the importance of good education which in the past they considered as a threat to their religion and culture. To make education for our Muslim students a preparation for a better life, for college and professional degrees as well as making it relevant to their culture and faith, we:

1. Integrate the most important Christian and Islam teachings in Value

Education classes. Teaching of human moral values is given primary focus in humanities classes. Values/virtues, life, love, forgiveness, respect for life, human rights, honesty, unity in diversity, etc. are talked about from the perspective of both Islam and Christianity. This is a beginning of interfaith dialogue with youth. The common understanding of such values as well as the acceptance of different experiences lead to a better understanding and acceptance of each other.

2. Separate religion classes. Muslim students go to their Islam class with the Ustadz teaching them. Christian students have their own class with the sisters. This strategy aims to deepen their knowledge and living out of their respective religion. In this way the Muslims are not afraid to study in our school. They feel respected and appreciated for their faith.

3. Have co-curricular activities in the school. All activities involve both Muslim and Christians. Important feasts of the Muslims are celebrated with Christian students participating; likewise with Christian activities. In fact, Muslims want to participate and take important roles in Christian presentations.

4. Foster the Parents' Councils Organization. We reach out to the Muslim parents through the school organization. We introduce some formation sessions in family life: caring and rearing of children; problems with adolescents; husband and wife relationship; role of women in the home and society, etc.

5. Make regular visits to the families of students. Muslim parents welcome our visit very much. Friendship with the family is developed. Trust and confidence are built between us and the Muslim family and the community as a whole.

All these initiatives have brought about a better understanding and harmonious relationship with our Muslim brothers and sisters.

In conclusion I can say that despite violence, threats and insecurities, the Daughters of Charity in Mindanao, Philippines, continue to remain faithful to our mission of witnessing to God's redeeming love for the poor, especially those of different faiths from us, with renewed vigour and enthusiasm, hope and love, as St. Vincent and St. Louise would want us to do and to be.